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ABSTRACT

Of the various accomplishments of the Conference on College Composition and Communication during the 1970's, three decisions have been outstanding: organizing and assisting two-year college English teachers, supporting the racism and bias committee, and adopting the resolution on the students' right to their own language. These decisions, with their roots in the 1950's and 1960's, are aiding composition instruction to develop into a college course with its own integrity in which students learn to control their own ideas and to write by catching, examining, and keeping their experiences. There are many good approaches for helping students to realize that what they have to say counts and that writing is not to be done according to a formula. (JM)

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Elisabeth McPherson

All God's Children Don't Got Shoes . . .

My assignment, I think, is to talk about what the Conference on College Composition and Communication has accomplished in the seventies -- and it's done a great deal -- but I want to concentrate on three CCCC decisions that have affected me most: organizing and assisting two-year college English teachers, supporting the racism and bias committee, and adopting the resolution on the students' right to their own language.

I don't mean to claim these accomplishments for the seventies. Their roots go back for 25 years, to the fifties, when people like John Gerber saw composition teaching, not as a stepchild of the department, to be pushed into a corner and left to the lowliest members of the hierarchy, but as an essential professional activity, deserving a professional organization of its own -- and created one that has become the liveliest part of the English teaching world.

The accomplishments belong to the sixties, too. That's when CCCC decided to subsidize a meeting of junior college English teachers, help them set up regional organizations, and appropriate money to get those new conferences on their feet, prop them up, and keep them from falling down again. As part of that propping up, representatives from all six of the regionals were made full members of the CCCC Executive Committee. Although I may be wrong, my impression is that junior college English teachers would have had trouble doing that organizing for themselves; they needed the support of a national professional organization. And the existence of the regional conferences has helped to change the attitude of junior college English teachers toward themselves, just as respect and recognition always change attitudes. At the first CCCC Executive Committee meeting I attended -- it's been at least ten years ago -- I heard a community college teacher apologising for how second-rate we all were. We don't do that much any more. We don't, most of us, worry about how the universities

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will judge us, or try to copy what they're doing. Instead, a few of us think the universities would do well to copy some of what we're doing, and we worry more about the integrity of our own programs than about producing a carbon copy of theirs. Nevertheless, it seems to me time for community college English teachers to take another two or three steps. We've been on our feet for about ten years, and we won't get much farther if we just stand there, congratulating ourselves that the present chairperson of CCCC is from a twopyear college, no matter how proud we are of him, or that most community college/composition courses are taught by full time teachers, whose main assignment is teaching writing. It's still true, I think, that freshman composition in a great many universities is taught by graduate assistants who, no matter how good they are, have most of their attention focused on their own dissertations, or by instructors who, when the touchy question of tenure comes up, find themselves shoved out in favor of a new batch of instructors not yet eligible for tenure, and cheaper besides. But junior college English departments do far more than just hire teachers whose main concern is composition. We're doing some research on what works and what doesn't -- but we should be doing more -- and we're publishing some of the results -- but we should be publishing more. I'm not suggesting that junior colleges should become research institutions -- one of the boasts of community colleges, deservedly, I think, is that we are teaching institutions. But we wouldn't damage our reputation as teachers by giving ourselves a bit more publicity. We're one of the relatively untapped resources this conference is all about. We need to stop complaining that we seldom get released time for writing -- we can always do it at midnight --and we don't expect a promotion as the result of what we write. I know some teachers who think there's nothing to be promoted to -- nothing more exciting they could be doing than teaching composition.

The second major CCCC accomplishment that has affected me -- the work of the NCTE Racism and Bias Committee -- doesn't really belong to CCCC, but we can claim part of the credit for it, in that the organization shared the cost of producing SEARCHING FOR AMERICA, the book that insisted texts couldn't be labelled "American" unless they included the work of all Americans, not just the ones in power. The racism and bias committee has done a lot. Minority writers are better represented in textbooks, and most publishers understand by now that those writers have to be there, partly because a good many teachers took the trouble to fill out the "give-us-your-opinion" cards by scrawling across them, "unacceptable; no Black writers." Minorities are better represented in teaching, too, although that's probably more the result of federal affirmative action programs than anything the profession has done. And minorities are better represented among the students we teach. That's all to the good, but it won't matter much unless those students are given a fair chance of succeeding in our classes. The students who, a generation ago, wouldn't have come to college at all, are one of the country's most important untapped resources, and it's the job of composition classes to make sure those resources are indeed tapped. There's an old junior college cliche about whether the open door is really a revolving door, whether open door means just letting people in and pushing them right out again if they don't conform to our preconceived notion of what college students ought to be like. And that gets us to the language statement.

The CCCC Executive Committee passed the resolution three years ago. The organization as a whole adopted it last year in Anaheim. Last fall in New Orleans the National Council of Teachers of English, at the business meeting, adopted a slightly reworded version of the same resolution. That's very nice, too, but it's only a beginning. As I've been saying to several groups of teachers this year -- occasionally to audiences that gave me rather chilly stares -- resolutions aren't

worth much until they get out of conferences and into classrooms. Nothing much happens if all we do is feel good by voting "yes" and then keep on teaching the same old way. There's even a possibility that the louder we proclaim our good intentions, the less we really change -- a variation on that other cliche, "The harder we work the farther behind we get." In other words, the publication of the language statement, and the coverage it's gotten in the press, even to a somewhat distorted version in Time Magazine, has called attention to the changes in composition teaching and made the forces of reaction more vocal. I don't think there's any real danger we'll be pushed back to the good old days, when freshman English was expected to act as hatchet man for the college -- get rid of the students the other departments didn't want to teach -- but the possibility is there. Educational Testing Service has put a usage section back into the Scholastic Aptitude Test, on an experimental basis, they say, because there was so much demand for it. Experimental, maybe, but the usage test is there, and it wasn't there two years ago.

Usage tests are designed to reward middle class white students, and penalize the others. I always got high scores, not because I'd been "taught" what the expected answers were but because I just put down what "sounded natural," and merely by chance I grew up in an area, in a family, where the choices that "sounded natural" to me were the ones the testmakers wanted. Most of the students in my college -- white, black, or oriental -- were not that lucky. Usage tests don't measure the ability to write well, unless our definition of good writing is very superficial indeed; they do measure geography and economic status and ancestry, information we could get very easily by just asking students a few questions. In what neighborhood, in what state did you grow up? What did your parents do for a living? How much money did they make? Usage tests are a measure of whether people grew up wearing shoes or going barefoot, or, if they did have shoes, whether they got them at Goodwill or at Gimbels, whether they paid $2.95

or $29.50. Using such tests to label people as fit or unfit, worthy or unworthy to go to college is like saying unless you wear shoes you're not one of God's children, you're not one of the people colleges are for.

But even supposing for a moment that changing long ingrained language habits was highly desirable, that it was one of the important things English teachers had to do, changing isn't all that easy, and there's a good deal of doubt about whether we could do it. We expect from students something we find it almost impossible to do ourselves. The best example I know right now comes out of the women's movement. I watch people trying to remember to say "chairperson" instead of "chairman," to say "people of good will" instead of "men of good will," and I hear them explain their lapses. Using man when they mean men and women is a lifetime habit, they say; "man" sounds more natural; they feel so self-conscious when they try to shift that they forget what they meant to say. These aren't people who think the attempt to change is silly. They're people of good will and good intentions. Learning not to say "his," unless it really refers to a man, is even harder. Apparently some people just can't be taught to say "Everybody clapped their hands," and if we gave them a usage test, asking them to eliminate all the mans and all the his's, they'd get pretty low scores. English teachers, especially, can't make that change, and I find it very interesting.

Usage tests, unfortunately, aren't the only symptom of reaction. There's pressure from other departments in the college -- more and more people telling us what we ought to be doing in English classes, even though we're polite enough to refrain from telling them what ought to go on in history or business administration or biology. It's the old cry -- "You're not teaching them to write right!" -- and I think it's getting louder. A friend of mine in another division, a good political liberal and a stalwart defender of student rights, keeps sending me

memos about "college standards." He's a nice man and I don't think he'd mind being used as an example. When I ask him what he means by "college standards" -- we're a college, and we have standards, even though we may not measure them by the same stick my friend would use -- his answer is always pretty vague. And it is, after all, not his fault that the impression he carried away from his own freshman course was that good writing is mainly spelling and semicolons, that comma splicing is a more serious crime than idea-splicing. Nobody told him anything about the nature of language, or the nature of dialects, or the ways in which language can define our identities and make us secure in them, or destroy our identities and make us distrust ourselves. He was, after all, a social science major, and nobody thought he needed stuff like that, so he graduated from college, got an MA and then a doctorate, without anybody giving him any honest information about language, or much definition of what good writing really is. My friend is a strong defender of liberal arts in a college where a lot of the emphasis is vocational, but he hasn't been convinced yet that a humane writing course, which helps students respect themselves and their language, which encourages them to examine their lives and their biases, can be the most liberalizing of all the arts.

My friend, and a lot of other people like him, think of composition as a tool course, like typing perhaps, which is useful only because it teaches students how to get a better grade in history, or how to get a job with Standard Oil. And writing is a tool, in one sense. But it's a tool intended for larger and more essential purposes than just picking the locks on tests and jobs, locks that should never have been installed there in the first place. Writing is a tool for building a whole new house, with a lot of open windows and doors in it, a house with plenty of room for both humanity and history tests, for both creativity and commas.

Before I get completely tangled in a metaphor I can't get out of, let me get back to a more straightforward statement. If composition is a course with its own integrity, then it will serve both the needs of the students and the needs of the rest of the college. It will not be a servant, in the sense that it meekly follows what other departments think they want us to teach, but it will come closer to achieving what those other teachers really want: students comfortable enough in writing that they have some real control over what they write.

If we see composition as a course with its own integrity, we'll concentrate on communication instead of mere correctness, and we'll care more about whether students control their ideas than whether they control their commas. We'll remember that writing is a way of coming to terms with experience, of catching it, examining it, and keeping it. We'll remember that writing forces form on what has been vague and formless, that writing is always self-discover in the sense that putting ideas into words, putting ideas into order, is a way of discovering what we think. That kind of discovery can be satisfying, once it's done, but doing it is never easy. We'll remember that students will endure the struggle of putting their ideas -- their selves -- into writing only for teachers who respect both the struggle and the result. Students won't write honestly for teachers interested only in "correcting," but most of them will write honestly for teachers who read with sympathy.

We'll still be teaching skills, but our emphasis will change and our definition of skill will be different. We'll emphasize the substance of writing, not just the superficial etiquette. We'll define skill somewhat like the NCTE Commission on Composition has done: the ability of a writer to share meaningful experience with readers in a meaningful way; to understand the needs of readers and adapt for those needs; to recognize the purpose of the writing and use that purpose as a guide; to adopt a voice or a point of view in each piece of writing and maintain that voice; to be able to shift voice or point of view according

to the purpose of the writing; to move from one level of abstraction to another; to play with language, creating metaphor and avoiding cliches; to support general statements with specific details and examples; to present ideas in such a way that the relationship between them is clear; to be able to discard, revise, and rewrite.

We will remember that skills such as these are achieved not by attacking weaknesses but by recognizing strengths. We'll also remember that all writing, no matter how incoherent or how incomplete it seems, does represent an attempt at communication, and we will treat it with respect.

As we make our students more comfortable, as we help them gain control, we'll talk a lot about language -- not about what's "right" and what's "wrong," but about what works and what doesn't, why one choice gets readers excited and another choice bores them to death. We'll talk -- and by "we," of course, I mean that the students will talk, not that the instructor will lecture -- we'll talk enough about choices and the effect of choices that students will learn a great deal about the nature of language. Not the terminology, probably, but the reality -- enough so that nothing said in the background statement published last year will either shock or surprise them.

The composition course will include rhetoric, too. It can't avoid it. But we'll be less concerned with teaching rhetoric than with rhetoric for teachers. We'll be less concerned with whether students know the jargon and more concerned with whether teachers practice the principles. As we teach, we'll be constantly asking ourselves who our audience is -- that is, who our students <u>in that class</u> are -- and adapting what we say to <u>their</u> backgrounds, interests, and needs, rather than to some hypothetical notion of who our audience ought to be. We'll be constantly asking ourselves what our purpose is, and not be sidetracked into spending time on a lot of irrelevant stuff that has nothing to do with that purpose.

We'll remember that one of our purposes is to free students from depending

on our judgments as to what's good, and to give them the confidence to form their own judgments -- to shake them loose from the notion that there are any absolutes, in thinking or in writing or in language.

I'm not presumptuous enough to suppose there's any single way to achieve these commendable aims or that, if there is a single way, I know what it is, even though I'm willing to be pretty dogmatic about what the wrong ways are. I'm fairly sure that putting most of the emphasis on how students communicate, instead of on what they're communication, is a wrong way, even though the how and the what can't always be separated. I think we can emphasize the what without forgetting the conventions of writing, even though we insist that the conventions are always secondary, the polish that's applied after the real work is finished. I'm pretty certain that some of the old approaches have taught a good many students to mistrust us, to mistrust their language, and to mistrust themselves.

There are lots of ways of teaching students trust, ways we know about and ways nobody has tried yet. Some successful teachers use the open classroom method to help students arrive at completeness and coherence. The open classroom, of course is more than "anything goes" -- more than arranging chairs in a circle and waiting for something to happen. It's a situation of collaborative learning, in which other students, as well as the teacher, respond to what students have written. It involves discussion about what went on before the writer began to write, as well as discussion about what's actually been written. The composition teacher is not an authority figure but a participating member of a group, all of whose members are engaged in the same enterprise.

Some successful teachers let their students compose with cameras instead of pencils. But to make a successful film, the students must ask themselves: what are we going to film? What point of view will we film it from? which shots will we keep and which will we throw away? what order will we arrange the scenes in?

In short, what do we want the film to communicate to the people who see it? That's just another way of getting at the problems of writing: what do you want it to communicate to the people who read it?

Some successful writing teachers begin with semantics. That approach has become more popular, and more important, since national events have demonstrated the frequency with which some of the supposedly best educated use language to distort and deceive -- and how easily they succeed. The materials produced by NCTE's Committee on Public Doublespeak can be a great help in protecting students from deception and discouraging them, in their own writing, from deceiving their readers or themselves.

There are lots of other good approaches, lots of ways of making sure that none of God's children -- our students -- have to wait to get to heaven to get shoes. Once we agree that good writing is neither mechanical nor formulaic, we know there can be no single, absolute formula for producing it. Good writing succeeds, and success implies achieving its purpose (which may or may not be consciously spelled out); meeting the needs of its audience (which may or may not have been consciously identified); adhereing to a set of values (which may or may not have been consciously recognized). Looking at the product -- the finished writing -- it is often possible to isolate the elements that make it successful. Looking at the process -- what goes on before and during the writing -- it is impossible to be sure what teaching method, or combination of methods, led to success. We'll not be surprised, then, that the content of good composition courses varies as much as the variety of teachers who teach it, the variety of students who take it.

We'll be ready for what this conference can offer: some of the resources we haven't tapped yet, some of the approaches we haven't thought of trying.